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TV Review | 'Queen of the Mountain'

## Examining the Life of Tess Goell, a Pioneering Archaeologist

By [ANITA GATES](#)

Tess Goell was the kind of American heroine that seemed to exist only in 1930's movies, played by Katharine Hepburn or Rosalind Russell. They were women bravely striding into what was largely believed to be a man's world — flying planes, battling city hall, working in formerly all-male offices or newsrooms. Goell strode into archaeology, a divorced, hearing-impaired Jewish woman amid Muslims in southern Turkey.

Her story, "Queen of the Mountain," a one-hour documentary directed by Martha Goell Lubell, a niece, has the feel of an affectionate family portrait, but that is not a complaint. The film, to be shown on Channel 13 tomorrow, is a strong, rich narrative with visuals to match.

Goell, whose real first name was Theresa, was born in Brooklyn in 1901, the second-oldest daughter of Russian immigrants. Her father wanted her to marry the rabbi's brother, and Goell did, but that didn't stop her from returning to her architectural studies at Radcliffe College afterward. She left her husband, Cyrus Levinthal, at home. She had a son, Jay, but motherhood didn't end her career dreams. Tutankhamen's tomb, filled with ancient treasures, was found in 1922, the same year she married, and it whetted her appetite to go digging into the past.

"She was self-motivated," Harriet Vicente, another niece, says in the film, "and that was a terrible thing in those days."

Goell had an additional problem. While she was still in college, doctors told her she was going deaf. She set out to learn lip-reading.

When Goell and her husband parted ways, she moved to Palestine in the 1930's. And then, after returning to New York in the 1940's, she went to Nemrud Dagh, in southwestern Turkey. Some students of ancient cultures had dismissed the 2,000-year-old mountaintop ruins there, from the kingdom of Commagene, because they were "too Oriental" for the classicists and too classic for the Orientalists. Goell thought that was what made the site interesting, with its colossal sculptures and reliefs of King Antiochus I and the gods. There were also huge stellae with inscriptions in classical Greek.

"This is not material for a term paper," she had announced years before, when she was given a school assignment about the site. "This is really a life's work."

And so it was. An abundance of evocative old photographs and film bring her quest — she began excavations there in 1953 — to life. The actress Tovah Feldshuh reads from Goell's letters, but, thankfully, the film provides Goell's real voice too, in crackly old recordings. "It was a complete

shambles," Goell says of her first glimpse of the Nemrud Dagħ ruins, with a blend of amusement and remembered despair.

Goell died in 1985, without achieving one heartfelt goal: finding the tomb of Antiochus. But she had accomplished a great deal. As a friend, Frances Horowitz, says in the film, "She got where she wanted to get."

### **Queen of the Mountain**

WNET, Sunday at 2 p.m.; check local listings.

Directed and produced by Martha Goell Lubell; Sharon Mullally, writer and editor; Peter Brownscombe, cinematographer; Sumi Tonooka, composer; Tovah Feldshuh, voice of Tess Goell; Kathryn Peterson, narrator.

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